



Evaluation of the European Heritage Label Action

Executive Summary



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Introduction

The evaluation of the European Heritage Label Action has been carried out as required by Article 18 of Decision 1194/2011/EU establishing the action. It aims to assess the implementation of the action during its first six years of existence (2011–2017), with a view of improving it in the upcoming period. Because the action is still in the early stages of its development, this interim evaluation assesses its impact to a limited extent, and focuses mainly on the operation of the action: what works well; what should be improved; and how this improvement might best be achieved. In addition, the evaluation has sought to answer fundamental questions concerning whether the action should be continued; whether its geographical scope should be widened; and whether it can be sustainable without any funding attached to the label. The evaluation examines five criteria: relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness and EU added value.

The main methods of data collection used include desk research, interviews, focus group discussions and open public consultation. Evaluators reviewed EU and international policy documents and relevant studies, and thoroughly analysed the action's administrative and monitoring documents (application forms, monitoring forms, and the Panel Reports on selection and monitoring). They carried out semi-structured interviews with the managers of all 29 sites that received the European Heritage Label (EHL) prior to 2017, as well as with a few managers of non-selected sites. The national coordinators of participating countries with and without EHL sites were also interviewed, as well as members of the European panel responsible for selection and monitoring; officials from the European Commission; and external experts. In total, 76 interviews were conducted. In addition, the evaluators collected the views and perceptions of local and national stakeholders via 10 focus group discussions. Six of these discussions took place at selected EHL sites; four other discussions were organised in Poland, France, Austria and Portugal. Finally, an open public consultation was launched to collect views of the general public and participants actors in the action. This consultation ran for 12 weeks (1 March 2018–28 May 2018), and received 102 valid responses.

The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics, content analysis, comparative analysis and prospective analysis. Based on the findings of the analysis, the following conclusions and recommendations have been made.

Relevance

The general objectives of the EHL – strengthening European citizens' sense of belonging to the Union and strengthening intercultural dialogue – are relevant to the current needs of the EU. They are also in line with the objectives of the New European Agenda for Culture to raise awareness of common history and values, reinforce a sense of common European identity, and promote culture and intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations.

The site-level objective of facilitating the sharing of experiences and exchanges of best practices across the Union is highly relevant to the need for European cooperation in the field of culture and cultural heritage. It is the most promising way to develop professional understanding and practice, and to strengthen peer-to-peer connections within Europe. However, this potential has not yet been fulfilled, and not all Member States are involved in the action. The question of widening the action's geographical scope is therefore premature at the moment, and would not be relevant until the action becomes more vibrant and well-established within the EU.

The main argument in favour of expanding the geographical scope of the action is that it would open up opportunities to develop European narratives outside the borders of the EU, and to connect them with non-EU countries, regions, continents and world history. However, it is not necessary to widen the participatory base of the action to achieve this broadening of European narratives. It can already be achieved by labelling sites that refer to specific topics and historical periods.

Recommendation 1: Continue and develop the action, but in the current phase do not expand its geographical scope outside the EU.

The EHL has, to some extent, proved relevant to a rising interest in culture and cultural heritage among EU citizens. Data from the open public consultation shows that the respondents are very interested in EHL sites, and want to learn more about them and the action.

However, the objectives of the sites applying for the EHL are not always congruent with the goals of the Label. The main objectives pursued by sites applying for EHL are preservation, restoration and conservation, which are not main EHL objectives. The analysis of selected and non-selected applicants shows that the main difference between their objectives is the topic of the European dimension. While the great majority of the selected sites acknowledge the spreading of common European values and history, and the strengthening of European identity, as objectives, only a minor share of non-selected sites do so. This may indicate that many applicant sites are not fully aware that the main feature of the EHL is a focus on the European dimension of cultural heritage.

Recommendation 2: Maintain the focus on the European dimension of cultural heritage sites, and the common values they represent, as a distinctive feature of the action and the basis for its development and achievement of its objectives.

Coherence

In terms of objectives, the EHL displays more similarities with other EU initiatives and programmes in the cultural field, rather than with global UNESCO programmes. The EHL places less emphasis on the preservation of the sites, focusing instead on raising European citizens' awareness of European history and culture. The highest level of similarity was found between the objectives of the EHL and the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. The EHL's aims of strengthening European citizens' sense of belonging to the Union and increasing their understanding of European history and culture were shared with other initiatives of the European Commission (the Europe for Citizens programme; Europeana); the EU and the Council of Europe (European Heritage Days); and the European Parliament (the House of European History).

During the evaluation period (2011-2017), some synergies were developed at local level between the EHL and other EU actions in the cultural field. These included the engagement of EHL sites in the annual European Heritage Days and European Capitals of Culture. Synergies at EU level, meanwhile, were limited. However, evidence shows that further synergies are likely to be developed at EU level after 2018, as a result of cooperation with the Council of Europe and the legacy of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage.

No duplications were found between the EHL and other European actions in the cultural field. This demonstrates that the EHL is a distinctive initiative within the EU. However, some risk of overlap was identified between the EHL and the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe.

Due to the transversal nature of cultural heritage, the EHL offers some potential for synergies with social, economic and international policy areas. These could be developed as a result of more active policy collaboration under the New European Agenda for Culture, and the forthcoming Action Plan for Cultural Heritage. Some synergies could also be achieved between the EHL and EU education and training programmes such as Erasmus+.

Recommendation 3: Exploit the points of coherence identified between the EHL and other EU actions in the fields of culture, education and citizenship (e.g. Europe for Citizens programme, Erasmus+, ECOC, etc.) and avoid any duplications in the future.

Efficiency and governance

The introduction of common selection criteria was one of the key changes introduced when the EHL transitioned from an intergovernmental initiative to an EU-level action. The attribution of the Label is based on three criteria: the symbolic European value of a site, and the site's project and work plan. The common selection criteria ensure the relevance of sites to the EHL's objectives, because the designated sites clearly define their European significance and commit to implementing activities that lead to the achievement of the action's objectives. Moreover, the common selection criteria have contributed to clarifying the types of sites represented by the action and, thus, to shaping its identity.

Compared with other programmes or initiatives in the field of cultural heritage, the criterion of European significance is a distinctive feature of the action, and *de facto* the core criterion for the attribution of EHL. Yet three quarters of non-selected sites did not meet it. This could indicate that the development of a European narrative is difficult for a large share of candidate sites.

Recommendation 4: Help candidate sites, as well as EHL sites, to develop their European narratives in order to meet and maintain their adherence to the criterion of European significance.

A wide range of sites, both tangible and intangible, individual and multiple, national and transnational, are eligible for the attribution of the Label. This distinguishes the EHL from other initiatives in the field of cultural heritage, and can be considered an advantage in attracting and uniting a variety of sites. Our analysis provides no evidence that this broad eligibility has a negative effect on the selection process, because sites are not compared with each other during the selection process.

The potential for cooperation and thematic networking is already built into the eligibility categories, but it has not yet been fully exploited. The majority of sites labelled between 2013 and 2017 were individual sites; mostly historic buildings, documentary and architectural heritage, and places of remembrance. Prior to 2018, only one transnational and one national thematic site were labelled.

Recommendation 5: Promote cooperation and thematic networking between Member States, with a view to labelling more transnational and national thematic sites.

It was assumed during the Impact Assessment of the action, especially by Member States, that selection first at national, and only then at European level, would be the only way to deliver a fair geographical distribution of the Label across the EU. However, the geographical location of a candidate site within a particular Member State plays no role in the selection process. Likewise, national quotas of one EHL site per Member State per selection year have not guaranteed that all Member States have EHL sites located in their territory, since the quality of the application is the main factor in the attribution of the Label. As a result, some Member States involved in the earlier intergovernmental EHL have failed to get any of their candidate sites labelled. Only 19% of sites bearing the intergovernmental EHL have been carried over to the EU-level action. The geographical distribution of EHL sites is mixed, with larger states having more EHL sites than smaller ones.

Recommendation 6: Balance the geographical distribution of the Label and involve more Member States, so that the action reaches more EU citizens.

The process used to select sites for the attribution of the Label involves two stages: first, Member States pre-select up to two sites in each selection year; these pre-selected sites are then assessed by a European panel of independent experts under the responsibility of the Commission. The analysis shows that a two-stage selection process may lack efficiency: of the sites pre-selected at national level, almost half submitted applications that failed to meet the selection criteria. Due to the autonomy provided by the legal basis

of the action, Member States apply different pre-selection procedures (top-down and bottom-up). These result in different opportunities for cultural heritage sites to participate in the action, as well as different levels of transparency in the national pre-selection processes employed by different Member States.

Recommendation 7: Increase the efficiency of the two-stage selection process, as well as increasing the opportunities to participate in the action for cultural heritage sites in different Member States.

The action's European-level selection works well, and the work of the European panel was generally smooth. The evaluators identified one area in which the efficiency of the assessment process could be increased. The Label may be attributed to a site only if its application meets all three criteria. Although three-quarters of non-selected sites did not meet the criterion of European significance, and could therefore not be attributed the label, they were still assessed by the panel against the other two criteria.

The panel communicates its selection decisions to candidate sites via their national coordinators, and prepares a public report on all candidate sites in every selection year. As a general rule, the selected sites consider this communication and feedback sufficient, while non-selected sites would prefer it to be more individualised and detailed.

Recommendation 8: Streamline the selection and evaluation processes, and provide more detailed feedback on the selection results.

The efficiency of national quotas (the selection of maximum one site per Member State per selection year) is doubtful. Various stakeholders see more disadvantages than advantages in applying them. While the quotas might have been useful in the initial stages of the action as a means to control the number of EHL sites, they are likely to become an obstacle for the action's further development.

Recommendation 8: In reviewing the legal basis of the action, we recommend the elimination of the national quotas of one site per Member State (Article 11-2). This reform was also suggested by the Panel in 2015 and 2017.

The first round of EU monitoring in 2016 was perceived positively by the sites and panel members who participated in it. The majority of EHL managers considered it to be useful in taking stock of their achievements and improving their site's performance. Analysis shows that half of all recommendations provided by the panel to the sites had been fully or partially implemented by 2018. Evaluators regard EHL monitoring in its current form as a performance review rather than monitoring in a strict sense, since it lacks a clear monitoring framework with common indicators.

Recommendation 10: Continue and streamline the performance review of EHL sites.

At the moment, communication of the Label to the public is moderate. Not all EHL sites have exploited the visibility and branding materials created by the Commission. Diverging perceptions among EHL sites, national coordinators and the Commission regarding the division of communication roles appears to be an obstacle to achieving the more efficient communication.

The Commission's communication with EHL sites and national coordinators was perceived to be mainly smooth. However, communication between the sites and national coordinators could be considered an area for improvement.

Networking among EHL sites is emerging, and great demand exists within the action for more intense communication. EHL sites and national coordinators are generally satisfied with the annual EHL days and meetings of national coordinators organised by the Commission, but they regard these meetings as insufficient for developing closer collaboration. The Commission intends to allocate funding to support the sites' networking

and cooperation activities under the 2019 work programme of Creative Europe, and has already published a call in October 2018 aimed at designing and managing networking and capacity-building activities among EHL sites.

Recommendation 11: Improve communication of the EHL, and promote cooperation and thematic networking among EHL sites.

Effectiveness

The EHL action has made some progress in reaching its two general objectives during its first years of operation. The first – strengthening European citizens’ sense of belonging to the Union – is a complex process, and subject to multiple influences. Still, the OPC results show that 71% of respondents who visited EHL sites either directly or online agree that the visit had strengthened their sense of belonging to Europe.

As cooperation and networking among EHL sites emerges, some progress towards the second general objective – strengthening intercultural dialogue – is visible. A large majority of national coordinators emphasise that the EHL provides opportunities for intercultural dialogue. However, a limited understanding among EHL site managers of intercultural dialogue, together with limited multilingual communication, are the main obstacles to achieving progress towards this goal.

Recommendation 12: Increase EHL sites’ understanding of and commitment to strengthening intercultural dialogue.

Progress is observed in stressing European symbolic value and raising the profile of EHL sites. Most EHL sites have highlighted their symbolic European value, and all sites received more publicity after being labelled. Despite this, developing a European narrative is still a challenge for some sites and identifying common topics remains difficult for the whole network.

Progress has also been made in increasing European citizens’ understanding of the history of Europe and the building of the Union, as well as their common yet diverse cultural heritage. Up to 91% of OPC respondents agreed that a visit to any of the EHL sites (directly or online) had improved their understanding of European history and culture, while 71% agreed that it improved their knowledge about the building of Europe and its integration.

Progress towards the intermediate objectives of EHL could be stimulated by developing and communicating the European narratives of EHL sites; promoting cooperation and thematic networking among them; and seeking coherence with other EU actions (Recommendations 4, 11 and 3).

Most of the EHL’s site-specific objectives have been achieved or partly achieved. While the Label has been successfully added to the communication and education activities of the sites, there is still a need to develop further educational activities that address common cultural heritage. Reaching local audiences is a challenge for many sites, as less than a half of them reported collaboration with local communities. Most sites have improved and increased their access for visitors, including virtual accessibility in foreign languages. Increasing intercultural dialogue is a challenge for half of the sites, while the other half demonstrates some good practice. Up to now, little progress has been made in fostering synergies between cultural heritage and contemporary creation and creativity. No evidence was found that the EHL contributes to the economic and sustainable development of regions, although one-third of sites report that they are involved in collaboration activities with local communities and businesses.

Half of all sites have implemented joint activities with EHL sites in other Member States, e.g. exhibitions, conferences, lectures, concerts, workshops and promotion events. In total, 16 collaborations and exchange projects were identified. Some sites prefer to cooperate with non-EHL sites dealing with a common topic, while half of EHL sites would

like to improve cooperation within the action. Establishing an EHL network as a structure for cooperation is a desire explicitly mentioned by stakeholders.

To reinforce the sites' progress toward their specific objectives, a mix of measures should be employed – in particular, those aimed at implementing Recommendations 4 and 11.

Most sites implement the EHL projects and work plans developed during their application process. Most commonly, EHL sites implement information, communication and education activities. Cultural activities and collaboration with other EHL sites are less common.

EHL sites report having gained a great number of benefits from being designated, including strengthened local support and European dimension; greater media attention; closer integration into Europe; as well as increased visibility and visitor numbers. Conversely, becoming an EHL site also poses challenges such as the additional need for financial and human resources; the low visibility of EHL in general; poor regional infrastructure that hinders the implementation of the project. Most managers of EHL sites admit that bearing the label is demanding for them in terms of resources.

Because the first EHL sites were selected in 2013, the sustainability of the action's results cannot yet be assessed. Nevertheless, some pre-conditions for the sustainability of the action were identified: clarification of the EHL's objectives (especially the notions of "European significance" and "intercultural dialogue"); collaboration between the EHL sites and a strong EHL network; capacity building among the sites; sufficient financial and human resources; and substantial research on the topics of European identities and values.

No major unintended consequences were observed when comparing the actual effects of the action with the expected impacts defined in the Impact Assessment.

Recommendation 13: Because the achievement of the EHL's objectives and the sustainability of its results relies largely on the capacity of EHL sites, we recommend that the Commission contribute to their capacity building.

EU added value

The added value provided by having the action operate at EU level (in comparison to the previous intergovernmental action) lies primarily in highlighting the European significance of EHL sites. The sites can thereby provide tangible content that fills abstract concepts like European values and identity. Furthermore, EHL sites can serve as a link between the European narratives and local sites and citizens. No concrete EU added value has so far been witnessed in strengthening intercultural dialogue. This might be a result of the characteristics of heritage sites, which seldom place a special focus on activities that offer great potential to support intercultural dialogue, as is seen in the fields of socio-culture, performing arts, urban spheres, etc.

The involvement of the EU has resulted in the establishment of common selection criteria, as well as selection and monitoring procedures at EU level. These developments can be identified as an important added value compared to the former intergovernmental initiative. EHL sites recognise EU added value of the action in the opportunity to share their experiences and best practices, to learn from each other, and to develop narratives on common European topics.

The termination of the action would be premature. It would send a negative signal to citizens, and specifically to the stakeholders of the sites and the cultural heritage sector, and consequently undermine citizens' sense of belonging to the Union. The efforts made by EHL sites to highlight their European significance and raise awareness among citizens would be severely damaged.

The action's EU added value may be limited by its scope being too narrow (i.e. by its focus on sites). To address this, we recommend broadening the scope of the action, in particular

by developing and communicating the European narratives of the sites; enhancing cooperation and thematic networking among EHL sites; and contributing to their capacity building (Recommendations 4, 5 and 13).

